

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
HOUSE SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON MILITARY AND VETERANS' AFFAIRS

April 18, 2023

1:02 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Representative Stanley Wright, Chair
Representative Laddie Shaw
Representative Cliff Groh
Representative Andrew Gray

MEMBERS ABSENT

Representative Ben Carpenter
Representative George Rauscher
Representative Dan Saddler

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

PRESENTATION(S): OVERVIEW OF THE DEPARTMENT OF MILITARY &
VETERANS AFFAIRS

- HEARD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

No previous action to record

WITNESS REGISTER

VERDIE BOWEN, Director
Office of Veterans Affairs
Department of Military and Veterans Affairs
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Gave the Overview of the Department of
Military and Veterans Affairs presentation.

ACTION NARRATIVE

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CHAIR STANLEY WRIGHT called the House Special Committee on
Military and Veterans' Affairs meeting to order at 1:03 p.m.
Representatives Shaw, Groh, Gray, and Wright were present at the
call to order.

PRESENTATION(S): Overview of the Department of Military & Veterans Affairs

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CHAIR WRIGHT announced that the only order of business would be the Overview of the Department of Military and Veterans Affairs presentation.

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VERDIE BOWEN, Director, Office of Veterans Affairs, Department of Military and Veterans Affairs (DMVA), began the PowerPoint presentation titled, "Overview Office of Veterans Affairs" [hardcopy included in committee packet] on slide 2, which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

Office of Veterans Affairs

Our Core Values

We hold ourselves personally and professionally accountable to deliver on America's promise to all eligible members we serve through courage, conviction, and a belief in our core values of Integrity, Compassion, Commitment, Selflessness, and Teamwork.

Our Motto

"Serving Alaska one Veteran at a Time"

MR. BOWEN moved to slide 3, which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

Alaska Veteran Demographics

64,388 veterans plus 141,653 dependents

War Time Veterans: 57,010

Peace Time Veterans: 7,398

Gulf War Service: 39,027

Vietnam Era: 19,023

Korean Conflict: 1,711

World War II: 275

Male Veterans: 48,083

Female Veterans: 10,305

Under age 65: 48,999

Over Age 65: 15,389

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MR. BOWEN advanced to slide 4, which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

Office of Veteran Affairs Staffing

- 4 full time-state employee + 17 grant funded Veteran Service Officers (VSO's)
- Serve Veterans, Active Duty, Reserve Components, and all dependents/survivors
- Serve as a conduit to assist in navigating every aspect of the State and Federal systems to secure all earned benefits to include discharge upgrade reviews and disability research and missing awards/lost medals
- Publish and distribute the Veterans Benefits booklet
- Staff and VSO's serve over 60,000 clients in 2023 and traveled to over 100 communities

MR. BOWEN moved to slide 5, which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

Major Accomplishments

- Renamed the Alaska VA Healthcare campus the Colonel Mary Louise Rasmuson Campus -1stVA Campus named after a noted female Veteran
- Held the first connecting female Veterans event -with over 150 participants
- Traveled to Gambell, Alaska and presented 16 Alaska Heroism Medals to the 1st Scouts who served in 1955
- Honored our Vietnam Helicopter Pilots through a day of events that culminated in the naming of the Vietnam Helicopter Pilot bridges

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MR. BOWEN transitioned to slide 6, which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

Major Accomplishments

- Receipt of a \$250,000 federal transportation grant, allowing over 1,173 Veterans funded travel for healthcare -Alaska is the only state in the nation selected for this program
- Veterans Memorial Endowment Grant provided the funds needed to complete the Wasilla Veterans Wall of Honor -Memorial Day 2022 was enhanced greatly by this new Honor facility

- Partnered with Fairbanks and Anchorage Stand Down committees services using an appointment system for Veterans in need during the COVID-19 crisis

MR. BOWEN moved to slide 7, which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

Major Accomplishments

- Created & produced informative and resourceful Veteran Benefits Book -includes important contacts and extensive veterans benefit guidance -distribute several thousand copies annually to veterans & their dependents

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MR. BOWEN advanced to slide 8, which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

Major Accomplishments

- Successfully navigated the USDVA Appeal boards and returned \$113M in single one time payments
- Partnered with the Archivist from the VFW -completed an additional 1300 Alaska Territorial Guard discharges
- Co-sponsors with the US Department of Veterans Affairs developing our Tribal Veterans Representatives (TVR) corps receiving VA 101 training -increasing the state-wide volunteer pool to over 500 -the largest Veteran's volunteer corps in the nation plus awarded the VA's Abraham Lincoln Pillar of Excellence Award

MR. BOWEN moved to slide 9, which read as follows [original punctuation provided]:

Major Accomplishments

- Co-sponsored moving Veterans Museum to a new larger location -doubled their Honor display capacity
- Co-sponsored 12 virtual state wide town halls directly reaching over 11,000 veterans and their families
- Partnered with State Dept. of Labor to support the localized job fairs and recruitment efforts directed towards veterans & their families offering support & guidance for veterans in search of stable careers & encouraging professional development

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MR. BOWEN concluded the PowerPoint presentation on slide 10. He added that DMVA receives many requests to investigate certain matters. He relayed a story about Private First-Class George Fox, who was the only Aleut killed during World War Two. He stated that nobody knew that he was buried by his mother in an unmarked grave in Unalaska. He said DMVA was able to place a headstone on his grave in the last year.

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REPRESENTATIVE GRAY stated that he has been tracking an investigation regarding an African American veteran's claim of racism concerning a disability benefit. He offered his understanding that these veterans would be less likely to get 100 percent service connection than white veterans. He asked for the status of the investigation.

MR. BOWEN answered that DMVA is tracking the investigation; however, any comments will be left to after the court's decision. He said that race is not marked on a DMVA claim.

REPRESENTATIVE GRAY suggested that when a veteran undergoes a physical exam, his/her race may become known then.

MR. BOWEN responded that there have been problems with the physical exams. He continued that issues of military sexual trauma would be brought to the secretary.

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The committee took a brief at-ease.

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CHAIR WRIGHT asked about the [Interior of Alaska] Veterans Cemetery.

MR. BOWEN explained that a plot of land was purchased in Salcha, Alaska, last year; it has passed environmental checks and was deemed acceptable by DMVA. He said \$16 million is required to build the cemetery.

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REPRESENTATIVE SHAW asked whether the cemetery would be federally recognized.

MR. BOWEN answered yes. In response to how many spaces there would be, he said there will be 500 column bearings, 500 crypts, and 500 niches. He noted that the crypts have three placements within them.

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CHAIR WRIGHT asked about the Veterans Treatment Court program.

MR. BOWEN answered that the program was opened in Fairbanks, and currently there are three individuals going through the treatment. He said once a person completes the wellness process, his/her records are expunged.

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REPRESENTATIVE SHAW complemented Mr. Bowen on the work he has done for veterans of Alaska.

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CHAIR WRIGHT thanked Mr. Bowen.

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REPRESENTATIVE GRAY thanked Mr. Bowen, and he commented that he does not hear many complaints about DMVA.

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ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business before the committee, the House Military and Veteran's Affairs Special Committee meeting was adjourned at 1:34 p.m.